

Willis House  
190 Willis Road  
York  
York County  
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5170

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67-408K  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

HABS  
PA  
63-YORK

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

WILLIS HOUSE

HABS No. PA-5170

Location: 190 Willis Road, York, York County,  
Pennsylvania.

Significance: The Willis House is the most pretentious and academically correct example of eighteenth century English domestic architecture in York County. The builder, William Willis, was a Quaker farmer and mason who built the York courthouse (demolished in 1841) in which the Continental Congress met, 1777-78, and the Quaker meeting house of 1766.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1762.
2. Architect: Since the owner was a mason who built other important structures in York, it is assumed that William Willis built his own house. He did not do the joinery, but was presumably the architect-builder of the structure exclusive of its trim.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The chain of title to this property includes the following owners: William Willis, 1752; Samuel Willis, 1800, and his heir Joel Willis; John Stahle et al., 1855; Trustees of Prospect Hill Cemetary, 1871 (still held property in 1979).
4. Alterations and additions: Pent eaves removed from gable ends, pent roofs from front and rear elevations. The front (north) door was walled up during the early part of the twentieth century, and a porch (now dangerously decayed) added to the south wall, which became the entrance. The interior has been little altered, except for the removal of most of the mantels.

B. Historical Context:

William Willis was one of early York's prominent citizens, a brick maker and mason by trade. When the courthouse was built (1754-63) he had contracts both to make the bricks and to erect the walls. He also built the Quaker meeting house in 1766, and enlarged it in 1783. He was a member of the Quaker meeting.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This is a commodious and sophisticated example of Georgian domestic architecture; its interior trim is simpler than one might expect in so large a house, perhaps because of the Quaker beliefs of its owner.
2. Condition of fabric: Fair to good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: Rectangular; 26'-9" x 32'; 2 1/2 stories, with sloping site creating a fully exposed basement on the east.
2. Foundations: Coursed limestone covered by white lime stucco.
3. Walls: Walls are dark red brick, laid in Flemish bond on the south and common bond elsewhere. The west gable has the builder's initials, "W W" and over the date, 1762, in glazed headers. There are two belt courses on each gable end, one on both the north and south walls, and a water table outlined by the stucco on the foundations.
4. Structural system, framing: A masonry wall under the central hall is intersected by an east-west transverse masonry wall, slightly offset to the north of center, which is the bearing wall for the partitions on the next two floors and which supports four-by-six floor joists (exposed in the basement).
5. Porches: There is an early twentieth century porch, three bays wide, in the center of the south facade. The original structure had stairs here, but probably not so large a porch.
6. Chimneys: There are internal rectangular brick chimneys on both gable ends, the east one being somewhat larger as it served the basement kitchen.
7. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: The original entrance on the north has been bricked over. The south entrance has a six-paneled door with a three-light transom above. The door on the basement level of the east wall has sidelights and is paneled, but at present is boarded over with plywood; it originally served the kitchen.

- b. Windows and shutters: The oldest photographs of the house, around 1900, show the two-over-two windows still to be seen. However, the size of the openings and the "glass tax" records of 1798 would indicate the earlier use of nine-over-six lights on the ground floor and six-over-six on the second floor. The gable end windows on the first and second floors do not appear to be original. There are two original window openings in each gable to light the attic; in 1798 these apparently did not contain glass.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The gable roof is covered with slate shingles approximately twelve inches square. Pent roofs originally extended across the south and north facades.
- b. Cornice, eaves: There is a simple cornice with a crown molding on the front and rear elevations. The gable ends formerly had pent eaves at the level of the cornice, and the eaves of the roof appear to have originally projected as far from the wall as the pent eaves. These were removed in the twentieth century.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: There are four rooms in the basement, those on the east side being the larger. The northwest room was later subdivided for a furnace and coal storage. The southeast room, with an outside entrance, has the original kitchen fireplace with the crane in place.
- b. First floor: The central hall is flanked by two rooms on each side. The stair is at the north end of the hall along the west side, and after turning 90 degrees it ascends from north to south. Each of the four rooms has a corner fireplace, those in the east rooms being somewhat larger than those in the west rooms.
- c. Second floor: The plan is identical to that of the first floor, but fireplaces are smaller.
- d. The upper half story is a floored attic.

- 2. Stairways: The stairways descend from south to north, and make a 90 degree turn to the east at the bottom. They are located one over the other. The stairway is enclosed with vertical pine sheathing on the first and second floors, and has a rectangular hand rail in the basement.

3. Flooring: The basement has brick flooring in the kitchen, dirt in the other rooms. The first floor has hardwood boards eight inches wide, some covered with linoleum. The second floor and attic have pine boards of random widths, from nine to fourteen inches.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster walls, some of which show evidence of several layers of paint and/or wallpaper. The stair is sheathed with wide vertical pine boards from the first to the third floor. Ceilings are of plain white plaster throughout. The attic has no ceiling. First floor joists are exposed in the basement.
5. Doorways and doors: The doorways are simply framed with beaded outer edges on the members. There are six original interior doors with HL hinges (two on the first floor, four on the second). The locks are not original.
6. Decorative features and trim: The southeast room on the first floor has the only original mantel (which has an elaborately molded shelf), but the chair rail and wainscoting is modern. The other three rooms on this floor have the original, narrow chair rail. All four rooms upstairs have chair rails, and three have pegboards, between four and ten feet in length, beaded on both edges, with turned pegs of the type usually associated with the shakers. The pegboards are about six feet from the floor, on a wall adjacent to the entrance doorway.
7. Hardware: Six pairs of original HL door hinges; original wrought iron crane built into the right rear corner of the stone work of the kitchen chimney. The lintel of this fireplace is a massive hewn timber, into the back of which various wrought and cut nails have been driven, apparently to hang vessels for warming food or perhaps damp clothes to be dried.
8. Mechanical equipment:
  - a. Heating: There were originally nine fireplaces. The two in the north rooms on the first floor have been plastered over. The kitchen fireplace has interesting folding doors of vertical batten construction which fold out to reveal an opening about five feet high by seven feet wide. There is an open warming oven at a height of three feet in the left rear wall of the chimney. The house was heated at one time with Franklin stoves and later it was heated with radiators. The coal-burning furnace was in the northwest room of the basement.

- b. Lighting: The house was wired for electricity in the twentieth century.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: Originally oriented toward Codorus Creek to the north, the Willis House was remodeled to face southward when its former front vista became a cemetery in the nineteenth century. The present (south) front view is of a modern housing project, about one hundred yards distant across the street.
2. Historic landscape design: No original walks, fences or landscape gardening have survived.
3. Outbuildings: A very large stone barn to the east of the house, built in 1820 by Samuel Willis, was destroyed by arson ca. 1970. Its ruins are standing.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Old Views: The Historical Society of York County has a photograph of the Willis House, from the northeast, taken in about 1900.

B. Bibliography:

Historical Society of York County, Vertical Files, BLS 3034, "Willis Families."

Kindig, Joe K., III, Architecture in York County (York: Historical Society of York County, n.d.), p. 19.

Prepared based on information gathered  
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